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An AP News Analysis

PANAMA'S ARMY WILL USE GUNS

Coup Raises Question of U.S.-Style Setup

By ROBERT BERRELLEZ

PANAMA (AP) — "They were going to do it sooner or later," the hotel maid said. "It's better this way. The suspense is over."

The maid was commenting resignedly on the overthrow of President Arnulfo Arias by the National Guard on Oct. 4. Like most of Panama's rank and file, among whom the Arias mystique took root and flowered, she is an unconditional partisan of the deposed president.

What she was saying, in a way, was that it was surprising to many people that the Guard allowed Arias even 11 days in office, so great is the long-standing enmity between the institution and the man.

Her resignation also partly explains the absence of any significant popular reaction to the ouster of the man who won the presidency in a landslide vote last May. The other part of the explanation is that the guard is ready to use bullets, not tear gas, to beat down opposition to the new regime—and the opposition knows it.

ARIAS ISOLATED

By taking refuge in the U.S.-controlled Canal Zone, where he is barred from open political agitation, Arias also has isolated himself from his people.

It is doubtful U.S. officials would allow him to walk out of the Zone—to lead the masses. This would be an invitation to a boundary line explosion endangering American lives and property. Sneaking out of the Zone into Panama's hills for a guerrilla-type stand would be suicidal. Panama's army is trained especially in counterguerrilla warfare.

A prevailing impression is that the real masters of Panama, the army, were willing to give Arias another chance at governing this volatile country, but that he nourished the army's fears of his alleged dictatorial proclivities. But few pretend that the coup had any moral justification.

AROUSED SUSPICION

Arias aroused suspicion among the military and civilians when, his critics say, his party juggled ballot boxes and ignored a Supreme Court edict in an attempt to insure an absolute majority in the National Assembly.

He tripped up when he went after the army and sought to put officers favorable to him in charge.

All of Arias' maneuvers were obviously designed to insure his stay in power. He had been overthrown twice before. This time the army said it feared he was building up to a dictatorship in the manner he tried abortively in the past. The army didn't act however, until it felt threatened.

The coup further clouds the deteriorating image of Latin America's military institutions. Although most countries have constitutionally elected governments, only five are considered relatively free of military interference or the threat of it: Mexico, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Uruguay and Chile.